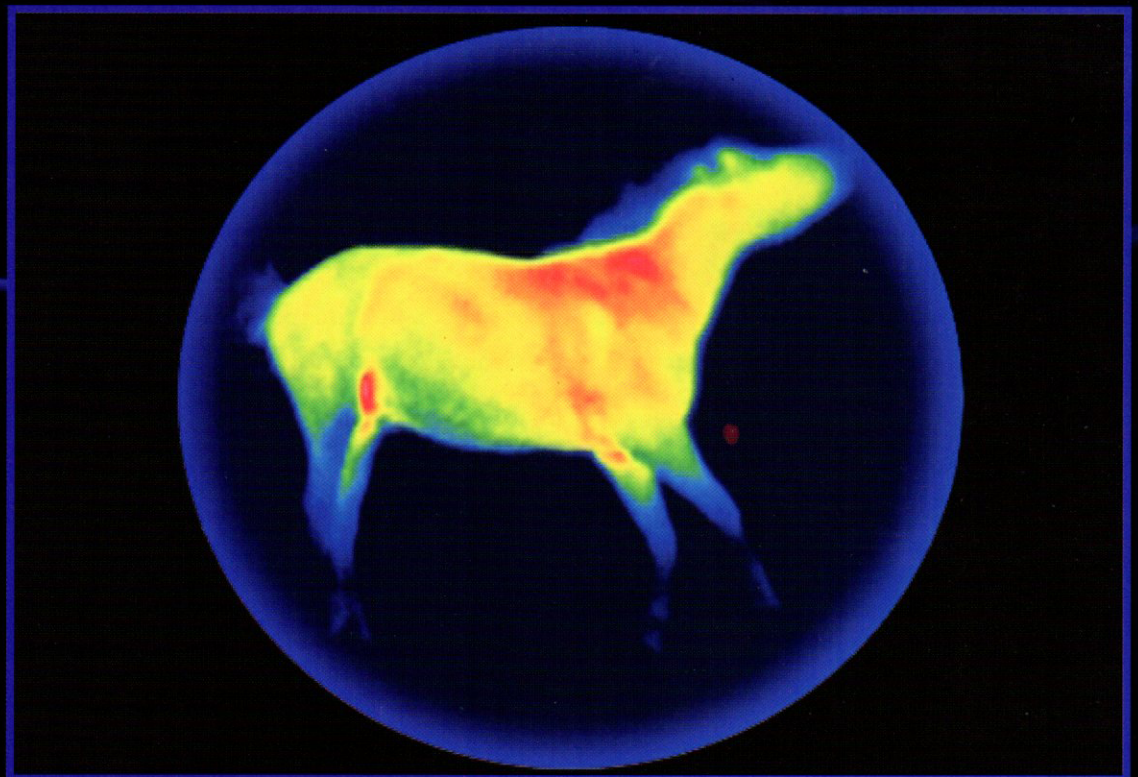


Uneasiness for Secular Indians

Under the rubric 'The Relations between Art and Science: complicity, criticality, knowledge', twenty-four art critics, scientists, art historians, and artists from over a dozen countries came together in October 2009 to explore the various points of intersections between art and science at the 2009 AICA (organization of International Art Critics) Congress, in Dublin, Ireland.

Suzanne Ankers (USA), with her extensive research and art practice in Gene Culture set the tenor of caution and concern. Her paper, illustrated with pioneering works like her 'Water Babies' and 'Codex Genome', brought home the vulnerability of human DNA in the expanding area of unregulated reproductive technology. As a significant exponent she stressed on artistic investigations of bio-genetics to increase global insight into its implications on the human race.

The papers by scientists presented an insider perception. Keith Robert's (UK) paper titled 'Sci-Art and The Rise of Biology as a Substrate for



Terike Haapoja Community (2007), *Community Kuva 7*, 5-channel video installation, 5-channel sound, Sound design Petteri Mård

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Water Babies,
(installation views),
digital prints on
watercolor paper,
dimensions variable,
2008

Visual Arts' underscored the emergence of the DNA Helix as a popular visual art icon. He pointed out that although the helix was not always accurately depicted in art and design, yet it was the artists' fascination for this esoteric form that propelled it into the global limelight and turned it into such a familiar symbol. Roberts spoke at length on DNA mapping and shattered the myth of its accuracy which has been the focus of many identity driven visual art commentaries.

Neurological responses to visual stimuli was demystified by Dr Semir Zaki (UK) in his well-received paper titled 'Neuroscience Facial Recognition in the Works of Francis Bacon' set out to elaborate on his study of brain electro-magnetic activity in response to extreme facial distortions in Bacon's art. By comparing brain imaging in response to facial deformities and symmetrical features, he touched upon human genetic memory that has been conditioned to recognize asymmetrical features as a universal standard of beauty. He also informed the audience how the brain reads black and white very differently from vibrant colors. These patterns, shown with the help of MRI images provided an insight into optic reactions to chromatic configurations which has held such a challenge for painters when faced with a virgin canvas.

Ethical and moral responsibility of science in the 21st Century was a thread picked up by many speakers as they expanded on the diverse ways in which science, its research and inventions have contributed to the transformation of contemporary art practice. An urgent call for a consensus for parameters to contain the ecological damage and control the threat to human values



Golden Boy (Stem Cells),
digital prints on
watercolor paper,
dimensions variable,
2004-05

also resonated with many as rampant commercialization of eugenics. Neurological enhancement and reproductive technology has begun to be seen as a serious risk.

Poignant and compelling was Terike Haaroja's 'The Community' (2005) from Finland. Presented by Laars Saari (Finland), it's ethical content presented through the immediacy of sophisticated technology made the audience rethink the slaughter of animals for consumption. The video installation with 5-channel video projects from above on five low platforms show the cooling down of an animal after its death. With the help of a heat sensitive infra red camera, each time a part cools down, it disappears from the screen; a process that can take up to 4 hours, depending on the size, for the entire animal's image to disappear from the screen. This was one work among dozens that testifies to the visual and conceptual synergy produced by the cross-pollination between art and science.

Also discussed was photography which was seen cutting its artistic umbilical cord from painting, to grow horizontally with a heavy implant of digital DNA.

Touching upon an entirely different dimension of the theme were speakers Prof Johann Swinnen (Germany) and Dr Akinwale Inipede (Nigeria) (whose paper was presented by Dr Ademola Azeez) spoke on art and science as a possible engine of social and economic empowerment in developing countries.



Johan Swinnen,
Amanul Haq portrait in
his house in Dhaka,
Bangladesh,
photography,
2010

Johan Swinnen's concerns regarding technology were centered around its influence on building stereotypes to further global hegemonies via the electronic media.

In his words "The manufacture of consent has rarely been more engineered. With everything from wars to presidential campaigns being stage-managed and with mainstream news increasingly fed by official sources, reliance on usual sources of news images has become gradually more dangerous. The majority of countries around the world suffer, particularly from stereotypical representations. With Getty and Corbis controlling the stock market, and Reuters, AP, AFP, BBC and EPA dominating the wires, communities in the west are looking for new ways to challenge established media, especially through citizen journalism. The only way in which this can be challenged is through alternative sources that are independent of western and corporate media." Dr Swinnen's interventionist role in the politics of representation took place at DIRKNews and Pathshala, two photographers' led initiatives in Bangladesh. Here he shared experience and facilitated the use of low-tech solutions to promote photojournalism in order to enable an energetic and activist media to counter stereotypes. Prof Swinnen strongly advocated the inclusion of all countries in a new Photographic History of the World.

The paper of Dr Akinwale Inipede from Nigeria brought into focus the widespread problem of misplaced faith in science as the only tool for progress which has marginalized liberal art education, particularly visual art, in the state education of developing countries. He sighted the example of his country where for a period art teachers were sacked just because their salaries were seen as a burden on the national exchequer. According to him there is an urgent need to treat art and science as complimentary subjects, so both creativity and scientific knowledge can contribute to skilled and imaginative thinkers with the capacity to bring social and economic change.

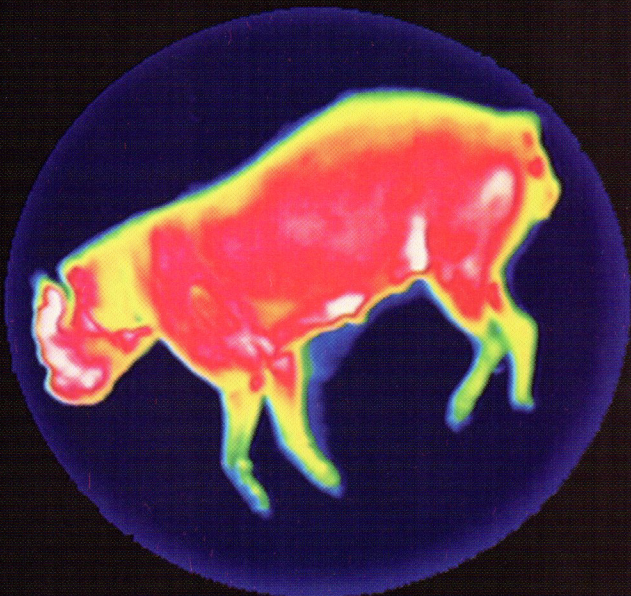
Argelia Castello's comment "...art criticism confronts unknown formulations due to complexities between scientists and artists: the discarding and accelerated obsolescence of new media; the use and abuse of technological tools in artistic creation, and co-authorial implications of the interaction with the public turned into media audience..." articulated the concerns of the art critics that find themselves faced with multiple challenges caused by the shifting frame of reference in contemporary visual practices. This is most evident in genres linked to new media art and gene culture that require a fresh terminology and updated knowledge of rapid output in these scientific fields.

Many art critics would have liked more papers to deal with the fundamental change introduced by postmodernism's loss of faith

in linear progress, strength of reason and faith in science, which has dismantled established rules of engagement in art. To the disappointment of the audience it was not taken further by the speakers.

The 2009 AICA Congress set out to investigate how the production of knowledge has benefited from the coupling of art and science. This objective could not be fully achieved as most speakers were from Europe and North America. Asian leaders in science like Japan, China and Korea were sadly not represented. (China is hoping to become an AICA member in 2010) As the group of art critics deliberated on the outputs of bio and digital labs and its impact on 20th century art practice, it was very evident that scientific knowledge, its lexicon and technique have expanded the conceptual and formal foundation but different ethical stands have created an instrumentalist art with a subversive intent that keeps issues of abuse of scientific research alive.

Shortly after World War II, in 1953, a similar AICA Congress in Ireland focused on art and science. At that time, any artistic connection to science in the aftermath of the nuclear atrocities offered little optimism. Some five decades later, after colossal leaps in pure and applied science, a new kind of pessimism persists and disciplines like art and science have found a way to co-exist by building a relationship based on shared curiosity, discovery and creativity.



Terike Haapoja Community (2007), *Community Kuva 6*, 5-channel video installation, 5-channel sound, Sound design Petteri Mård

Terike Haapoja
COMMUNITY [2007]
 5-channel video installation,
 5-channel sound
 Sound design Petteri Mård

Entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, is a measure of a system's tendency towards spontaneous change. Entropy describes the process of increasing of disorder in the universe. All systems tend to progress in the direction of increasing entropy; differences between states and entities gradually disappear. Entropy also suggests an arrow of time: the process of entropy is irreversible.

As we die, the difference between us and our surroundings vanish. We give away the energy needed for sustaining life, we lose the coherent form of our body, and finally, we become dust. We see this happening to others, but never to ourselves: death is always for someone else. In the times of climate change and mass production of animal products and other commodities we can see that entropy and death ally with capitalist economy. The faster the commodities rot, the more effective is the circulation of capital. But despite the illusion of endless return of goods, this process is irreversible, as the law of entropy predicts. Individuals, species, tend to disappear.

The installation *COMMUNITY* consists of 5 video projections and sound. In each video is shown the cooling down of an animal's body after its death, recorded by a heat-sensitive infrared camera. The videos are projected on round surfaces in life size. During the process the image of the animal slowly vanishes from the screen, as its body loses its heat. Spectators, gathered around the disappearing images, become part of the scenery. Durations of the videos vary from 2 to 5 hours.